

EQUAL JUSTICE MATTERS

IMPORTANT NEWS FOR OUR CLIENTS & COMMUNITY

www.nlsa.us

November 2010 | Volume 1 | Issue 2

CAN'T AFFORD A LAWYER?

Help is a phone call away! Neighborhood Legal Services (NLSA) provides free civil legal services for low-income residents of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties.

Free Civil Legal Help with:

- Family Law
- Employment Law
- Protection from Abuse
- Public Benefits
- Housing Problems
- Elder Law
- Consumer & Bankruptcy Problems

Call the Toll-Free Legal Helpline @ 1-866-761-NLSA (6572)

Helpline hours are:

Monday – Friday:

9am – 12pm and
1pm – 2:30pm

Monday and Wednesday:

5pm – 8pm

**Income guidelines apply*

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next issue... February 2011



JUSTICE IN HOUSING AND SHELTER

As winter approaches, issues surrounding housing, heat, and energy are on the minds of many low- and fixed-income individuals. Over the past 45 years, Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA) has helped individuals in Allegheny, Beaver, Butler, and Lawrence Counties obtain justice in these matters. We are committed to helping many more.

This issue of *Equal Justice Matters* is dedicated to providing information you can use to educate yourself on matters related to your housing needs. You'll find resources to help with a variety of housing and shelter needs, including your rights to access public housing. You'll also find information on the LIHEAP and Dollar Energy Fund, which exist to help qualifying households manage energy bills. Finally, you'll find a story of success, detailing how NLSA helped an elderly grandmother keep her possessions and her dignity.

Equal justice for all persons regardless of economic status is a basic concept and right in our system of justice. At NLSA, this is our creed and our commitment. I urge you to take advantage of the information contained in this issue of *Equal Justice Matters*. There is a wealth of resources available to help with your housing and shelter issues. The goal of NLSA is to make finding these resources easier for you.

Robert V. Racunas
Robert V. Racunas
Executive Director

WINTER IS APPROACHING- UTILITY ASSISTANCE FOR THOSE WHO NEED IT:

LIHEAP:

The 2010 LIHEAP program applications became available on November 1, at the County Assistance Office or online at www.dpw.state.pa.us/foradults/heatingassistanceliheap. This is a program designed to provide cash and crisis grants to qualifying households of varying sizes in order to help supplement the cost of their home energy bills. Camper and RV residents may also be eligible.

Dollar Energy:

The Dollar Energy Fund partners with utility companies across the state to offer hardship, customer assistance, and weatherization programs allowing individuals and households to keep their utility services turned on.

Information and applications can be obtained from:

Dollar Energy Fund Inc.
P.O. Box 42329
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
412-431-2800
800-683-7036 (Toll Free)



Funded, in part, by the Commonwealth and through a contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). The official registration and financial information of Neighborhood Legal Services Association may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement. Federal regulations applying to NLSA require that we notify all donors that no funds can be expended by NLSA for any activity prohibited under P.L. 104-134 or otherwise prohibited by 45 C.F.R. § 1600 et seq.

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AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Affordable housing is available for low income households and individuals through public housing authorities. To find out if you are eligible or how to apply, contact your local housing authority.

Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh
200 Ross Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219-2010
(412) 456-5000
website: www.hacp.org

Allegheny County Housing Authority
625 Stanwix Street, 12th Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-2111
(412) 355-8940
website: www.achsng.com

McKeesport Housing Authority
2901 Brownlee Avenue, 2nd Floor
McKeesport, PA 15132
(412) 673-6942
www.mckha.org

Beaver County Housing Authority
300 State Street
Beaver, PA 15009-1629
(724) 775-1220

Butler County Housing Authority
114 Woody Drive
Butler, PA 16001-5692
(724) 287-6797
www.housingauthority.com

Lawrence County Housing Authority
481 Neshannock Avenue
P.O. Box 988
New Castle, PA 16103
(724)-656-5100
www.lawrencecountyha.com



Neighborhood Legal Services Association

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NEED AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

Finding decent affordable housing in the Pittsburgh area can be difficult, especially if you are on a fixed income. Ideally, your rent should only be one-third of your household income, including utilities.

If you find yourself struggling to pay rent or living in substandard housing, it might be helpful for you to move into a low-income public housing community run by your local Housing Authority.

Your local Housing Authority offers housing with affordable rents based on a family's household income and family size. To apply, contact your local housing authority, using numbers provided to the left of this article.

A Housing Authority is permitted to deny a family housing for many reasons, including a

past criminal background or a poor credit history. However, every applicant has the right to a grievance hearing to dispute the Housing Authority's decision.

Our office helps clients present their case, such as helping clients show that they have rehabilitated themselves from any past criminal activity. We also help clients clear their debts in bankruptcy so they are eligible for public housing. You should **NOT** allow a past debt with a Housing Authority stop you from applying for housing.

If a Housing Authority denies your application to low-income public housing, contact our helpline at 1-877-761-6572 so we can help you appeal the decision. Your denial letter will tell you how many days you have to request an "informal hearing," which is typically only a few days, so you must act quickly.

TIPS TO HELP SECTION 8 TENANTS PREVENT EVICTION

If you are a Section 8 tenant, it is extremely important that you take all steps necessary to avoid losing your housing. Here are important tips for saving your housing:

1. Do not pay your landlord any more than Section 8 has determined your rent to be. Higher rent is a violation of your tenant obligation and should be reported to your housing counselor immediately.
2. Do not sign a lease or move into a new unit until it has passed the Section 8 Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection. Otherwise, if the unit fails to pass the inspection and the landlord refuses to make the repairs, you will still be stuck in the lease, and Section 8 will not pay your rent.
3. Be at your home when an inspection is done and point out problems that you see to the inspector. Otherwise, you may later be held responsible for those problems.
4. **Respond to the letters sent out for your annual recertification immediately.** If you do not respond quickly, you may be terminated from Section 8 for failing to recertify. Once you are terminated, you will not be eligible for Section 8 again.
5. Report all changes to your family size or income immediately. Make sure you get **time-stamped copies** from your housing counselor to prove that you provided the information to the Housing Authority.
6. Always get a time-stamped copy of every paper or document that you take to Section 8, so that you have evidence that you submitted the paperwork on time. Having a time-stamped copy will help save you from any claims that you failed to provide the correct paperwork.
7. Do not call and leave messages for your Section 8 housing counselor on time-sensitive matters. To prove your case, you must go to the office on walk-in days and get documentation that you were there.

Remember: If you are a Section 8 tenant and you receive a termination notice from the Housing Authority or an eviction notice from your landlord, call our office immediately so we can evaluate your case for service.

WHAT IS NLSA?

Neighborhood Legal Services Association (NLSA) is a private, nonprofit corporation created to provide high quality, free civil legal services to low-income individuals, the elderly and victims of domestic violence of Allegheny, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence counties. NLSA represents clients in many ways depending upon the type of legal problem. The more serious problems will result in an NLSA attorney providing representation. Less serious matters will result in the client getting legal advice and/or a referral to a private attorney who may provide the representation free or at a reduced rate. Because the demand for legal aid exceeds our ability to provide direct service in all cases, we have to set priorities. Our situation is sort of like emergency rooms which practice triage when the need outweighs the capacity of the treatment center.

We provide attorneys in Protection From Abuse cases; evictions from public/subsidized housing; some private housing evictions; tax sales of homes; mortgage foreclosure; wage claims; expungements; child custody where the child has been snatched or the custodial parent has been sued by the non-custodial parent for custody; SSI denials; unemployment compensation; public benefit denials (Medicaid/TANF/GA/Food Stamps); utility terminations; bankruptcy to protect a residence or stop a utility termination; and executions on essential personal property.

If you do not have one of these problems, you may get telephone advice and/or a reduced fee referral to a private attorney who will provide representation at a reduced rate. These cases include support; divorce; other custody/visitation matters; non-emergency bankruptcies; debt collection matters; and general landlord tenant matters involving security deposits or maintenance issues.

We also have a few special grants to help specific populations. Some of these include providing legal assistance to the elderly (60+) at Senior Centers in Allegheny County, counseling individuals in danger of foreclosure, and representing children in guardianship proceedings in Beaver County.

To inquire about our services, please call your local office or 1-866-761-6572.

FIND ANSWERS ON NLSA.US

If you have questions about your relationship with your landlord and the rights and responsibilities on both sides, NLSA pamphlets and tip sheets provide free information to answer some of your questions. Visit our website to find the following guides:

- Tenants Guide to Renting
- Landlord's Duty to Make Repairs
- Right of Quiet Enjoyment
- What Kind of Notice to Vacate is Required
- Tips for Representing Yourself at a Magisterial District Judge Hearing
- How to Appeal the Magisterial District Judge Judgment
- Tips for Moving Out and Getting Your Security Deposit Back
- Mobile Home Park Lot Lease Rules

You can also find information about the following housing and shelter issues:

- Dollar Energy Grant Information
- LIHEAP

The information contained on the NLSA web site is meant as a self-help tool. Another helpful resource for legal information is www.palawhelp.com. The first step in getting an issue resolved is educating yourself on the issue. The web sites are very user friendly. If you have difficulty, call us at 1-866-761-6572.

www.nlsa.us

TOPIC:

Legal Information

CLICK ON:

Housing and Shelter

LOCAL NLSA OFFICES

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

928 Penn Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-3799
Telephone: 412-255-6700

BEAVER COUNTY

Stone Point Landing, Suite 204A
500 Market Street
Bridgewater, PA 15009
Telephone: 724-378-0595

BUTLER COUNTY

Holly Pointe, Suite 301
220 South Main Street
Butler, PA 16001-5973
Telephone: 724-282-3888

LAWRENCE COUNTY

125 East North Street
Suite 329 – Temple Building
New Castle, PA 16101-3751
Telephone: 724-658-2677

NLSA'S MISSION

Our mission is to meet the civil legal needs of the poor and vulnerable in our community through effective legal representation and education.

REMEMBER: The law often changes. Each case is different. This newsletter is meant to give you general legal information and does not constitute specific legal advice. Please use the information in this newsletter carefully because it may not accurately reflect any changes in the law that occurred after its initial publication. If you need legal help, please immediately contact our helpline (1-866-761-6572) or your local Bar Association's lawyer referral service.

NLSA

Neighborhood Legal
Services Association

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CASE IN POINT

Actual Client Stories

WHO:

Mamie

TOPIC:

Housing

Well into her nineties, Mamie gave her grandson Power of Attorney and authorized him to receive her Social Security checks and pay her bills. The grandson failed to pay the rent and convinced Mamie that the landlord was lying when he alerted her to the problem. After several months without payment, the landlord sued Mamie, changed the locks on her apartment, and attempted to evict her.

When the constable came to sell her furniture, Mamie contacted NLSA. Despite the fact that Mamie's grandson left her destitute, NLSA was able to stop the sale of her possessions and file bankruptcy on her behalf, which qualified Mamie for subsidized housing. Mamie now lives in a cozy one-bedroom apartment with all of her furnishings intact.

Equal Justice Matters is a free publication of NLSA and is distributed electronically three times a year. To continue to receive this publication (in electronic form), please visit www.nlsa.us and complete the Sign-Up box for our e-mail newsletter or e-mail enews@nlsa.us. Please include your name and email address.

NEIGHBORHOOD HAPPENINGS

From Housing Crisis to Homelessness—Programs that could assist you.

Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing (HPRP)

HPRP is a program designed to prevent homelessness. Residents may call their local number to see if they qualify for rental assistance to prevent eviction or if they need assistance with a new move.

Allegheny County: 1-877-350-4777 (Call Center)

Beaver County: 724-728-6000 (Franklin Center)

724-775-0758 (Catholic Charities)

Butler County: 724-287-4011 (Catholic Charities)

Lawrence County: 724-658-7258 (Lawrence County Social Services)

Community Human Services (CHS)

CHS offers clients a comprehensive package of services designed to fulfill multiple client housing needs. Whether the client is facing difficulties staying in their current place of residence or simply trying to find one, the CHS supportive outreach team provides food, clothing, and shelter. CHS also provides agency referrals for already homeless individuals and supportive housing programs designed to build self sufficiency of the tenant. Housing location assistance for individuals, families, and disabled is also available.

Information and applications can be obtained at CHS headquarters:

1945 Fifth Ave. Suite 300

Pittsburgh, PA 15219

412-246-1643 | Or online at www.chscorp.org/SOT.htm

Urban League of Pittsburgh

The Urban League offers a wide range of housing and homeless prevention services for eligible individuals and families. This organization deals with eviction prevention, usually through trained staff mediations between tenants, landlords, and creditors. Help with locating reliable and affordable housing is also available, as well as advice on mortgages and purchasing processes for those looking to own their own homes. Applications and more information located at:

610 Wood Street

Pittsburgh, PA 15222

412-227-4802 | Or online at www.ulpgh.org



Neighborhood Legal Services Association

928 Penn Avenue | Pittsburgh, PA 15222

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